

Academic Growth Part IV
By Renard De Fleureaux III

“So... saw you on the news.” Rehgan’s IM popped up on my screen.

I grimaced. “Oh?” I typed.

“Well, maybe. I don’t know many giant hybrids that are able to catch cars before they fly off a bridge are in your area.”

“Haha. :P”

“c: Seriously, you okay, dude? Media seems to be all over you.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t bad as it was a couple days ago.”

“Alright, well, lemme know if I can do anything. And go see a doctor!”

I sighed, leaning back in my chair- or at least, leaning as far back as I dared. My back was easily three times as wide as the back of my chair- my new chair, rather. It was the third one I had gone through since the change. For those of you not in the know, a few weeks ago, I was your everyday half lion, half wolf hybrid college student. Then a Cheshire cat with a ridiculous name tricked me into gaining over three hundred pounds of muscle.

Yes, it’s going to be that kind of story.

A few days ago, the damned cat, named Theo, decided that I ought to get even more attention, because when you’re the school freak, the one thing you want is city-wide, no, even better, nation-wide media attention, right? I caught a car before it careened off a bridge, and suddenly everyone wants my “story”, and how do I tell them a magical trickster cat just sort of *made* me this way? Everyone would think I was crazy. But for now, I had bigger problems, as I scanned my e-mail, bringing up an official looking one from my University’s Finance office.

The bastards.

My school had been uncharacteristically understanding about the whole thing, and had refitted my room, re-enforced furniture, and given me an extension on my meal plan to fuel what was, admittedly, a very powerful, but very hungry, body. Here before was why they had been so pleasant; they wanted to charge me an arm and a leg for everything.

“Rehg, you’re not going to believe this.” I switched back to my friend’s IM. Rehgan was an old friend and workout partner, and one of the first I went to for advice dealing with my situation. He’d been quick to stress going to a doctor, which I hadn’t quite gotten around to yet.

“‘Sup?”

“The School- they want to add thousands of dollars to my account for all the help they gave me. I wouldn’t have accepted if I knew that! They’re fining me for every piece of furniture in my room- even things that never needed replacing!”

“:/ That is so fucked up, man.”

“What am I going to do? I don’t have that kind of money. I can’t even get a loan! Rehg, I’m fucked. Royally, absolutely fucked.”

“Calm down for a bit, think about it. Is there a job you can pick up, maybe? Some sort of deal you can work out with the school?”

“No! I had to quit my job at the Fitness Center- they don’t supply XXXXL uniforms.” It was true. Though, only partially so; I had been told, in private, that I might ‘intimidate’ other gym patrons.

Rehgan’s message was a bit delayed as he took in my situation. “Shit, dude. There’s got to be something...”

“Well. A few news stations are offering me money for interviews...”

“You sure you want that type of publicity? Sort of moot after what you did, but still.” He was absolutely right- my little act of heroism was everywhere, but the last thing I wanted to do was fan the flames.

“What choice do I have? I can’t just quit school and still have student loans out the ass.”

“I’m really sorry, man. I got nothing. Sounds like you gotta do some of the interviews, then, or something. Maybe it won’t be so bad?”

“Maybe.”

“:/ Whatever happens, good luck- you can pull this off.”

“Thanks. I need some time to make the arrangements, I guess.”

“’course.”

I was rubbing my temples at that point, as the beginnings of a headache started to set in. There were hundreds of e-mails to sift through, from Newspapers, Bloggers, TV News Stations, Talk Shows... even a few for Reality TV. Those were the first to go; freakishly huge I may be, but it was a very different freakishly huge than the likes of Honey Boo Boo and her ilk, and the further I could distance myself from people like that, the better. I may have been desperate, but a man has his principles.

“Still fighting off the paparazzi, Mr. De Fleureaux?” a familiar voice purred behind me. Theo, the source of my current predicament, slowly appeared into being behind me. He was a colorful cat, with loud, blue and green fur that I could only assume was his natural color, dressed in antiquated clothing that still showed off his own robust physique.

“Theo, not now. I still want to punch that grin right off your face for what you did.”

“And I feel ever so bad about it, my dear sir. I’ve been languishing over it, truly.” Theo purred, his hands already kneading at my broad, mountainous shoulders.

“Hey- hey! Hands off.” I snapped, batting him away. He was a handsy one.

“Truth be told, I’ve missed you, Mr. De Fleureaux... you haven’t been down to the gym I set up just for you in QUITE some time...” He dropped the little green crystal he had supplied me with. It was some strange device that teleported me to a scrapyard in Pittsburgh- where else would it be- where the cat had “graciously” set up a gym for people my size. Apparently, I wasn’t his first victim. I wish I could be surprised at that.

“I’ve been a little bit busy, dealing with the fallout from the near tragedy YOU caused.” I said, swerving around to poke him in the chest. The fact that he staggered back from my touch was, admittedly, a bit gratifying.

“And as I said, it makes me feel just *awful*, Mr. De Fleureaux. I’m here to offer my services. You yourself know how... persuasive I can be. Let *me* handle these media hounds, and find the most profitable, least... exploitative, shall we say? Offer available to you.”

I gave the Cheshire and his wide grin a long look. Imagine being George Washington and Benedict Arnold promises he’ll pay you back if you spot him a ten, and you can roughly imagine the immense size of the mountain of doubt I had.

“If I get a whiff of any funny business, Theo, I’ll grab you by your tail and bend you into a pretzel- understand?” I said, standing at my full height. Theo had a few inches on me, but I threw all my weight against him, bumping thick, bulging pecs against him so my message got across.

“Of course, Mr. De Fleureaux, you’re coming in crystal clear- ‘funny business,’” he chuckled good naturedly as he patted my head, stepped around me, and smoothly draping himself over my chair, “Perish the thought.”

I looked over his shoulder as with a mere gesture from his hands, hundreds of e-mails vanished from my screen. “These things are always a bit finicky...” Theo muttered, making more e-mails disappear until only one remained. Automatically, my printer whirled to life, printing out a few pages. “I much prefer working in paper, myself.”

I snatched up the paper, muscling my way past him to be the first to see what he was proposing.

“TT Clothing... they want me to be a model and spokesman.” I sighed, frowning at the cat. “Really? Your solution to me getting as little attention as possible is to be a model?”

“It’s quite up to you, Mr. De Fleureaux... would you rather appear on hour long interviews seen across the country and the world, or be plastered on billboards that will cover your face and only reach out to the niche audience of Big and Tall Men’s clothing? And look... they’ll offer you free stock on top of a very generous offer. If I’m not mistaken, you *do* love your fine clothing, Mr. De Fleureaux.”

His grin was only insufferable as it was because he was making a lot of sense. A number of dress shirts, vests, ties, overcoats, and suit jackets still hung forlornly in my closet, all of them hopelessly small for me.

“I’m not signing anything. We’re just going to check it out, meet with them, and I’ll *think* about it. Understand?” I crossed my arms, threatening the integrity of my sleeves as my biceps bulged at the tension of being smashed up against my other over-developed muscles.

“Of course, Mr. De Fleureaux, of course.”

TT Clothing had a corporate office downtown. They seemed a very respectable business on the outside, at least. A well-staffed, clean office, lots of design sketches of plus sized shirts, outdoor apparel, and suits. I had stuffed myself into a dress shirt that was exceptionally tight around the chest, as it was more designed for the morbidly obese than the exceptionally over muscled. Theo, in a surprising act of subtlety, was wearing a plain grey business suit instead of his usual Regency Era outfit. Receptionists and secretaries ushered us in to a photo studio, with green screens, a small army of photographers, and plenty of very expensive looking equipment strewn about.

A frankly huge painted horse in a surprisingly complimentary suit came sauntering up. He wasn’t obese, but he wasn’t my type of huge, either. He existed in some sort of limbo, where his bulk was solid and strong, but definitely came from overeating than bodybuilding. He was a solid cube of flesh, is the best way I could describe him.

He let out a whinny, as you do if you are of the equine persuasion, as he held out his hand. “Well! No need to ask who you are! Renard- can I call you Ren? It’s a pleasure to meet you!” He vigorously shook my hand, and I gripped his hand firmly in return.

“Hoosh!” the horse gasped as we let go, “That is SOME viper grip, son! I’m Mr. Taylor, of Taylor’s Tailors.”

I suppressed a groan at the name. TT Clothing. Taylor’s Tailors. Do you get it? I certainly hope you do, because if I have to explain it, someone’s losing a limb. “It’s a pleasure, Mr. Taylor. I was flattered you wanted me as your spokesman.”

“And this must be your agent! Put ‘er there!” Mr. Taylor stuck out his hand again for Theo.

“Mr. Renatus, if you please, Mr. Taylor.” Theo grinned as he took the horse’s hand.

“Well! Ren, m’boy, when I saw you save that poor ol’ woman and her kids the other day, I said to myself, I said, ‘Taylor, now here is an actual *model*. Someone respectable! You owe it to yourself and your company to get someone that exceptional.’ And I couldn’t help but agree with m’self, and we’re both just pleased as punch you decided to sign on!”

I gave a nervous grin, “Well, uh, actually sir, I haven’t signed on just yet.”

Mr. Taylor let out a braying laugh, “Well, I can’t blame ya, son! Smart move, smart move. No doubt you want to see what we have in store for ya’ll? C’mon over and lemme show ya.” Taylor beckoned, his lumbering gait leading us over to a package of clothes- workout shorts? Boxers?

“TT Clothing has been making clothes for the, ah, enlarged gentleman for over twenty years, and I’m here to tell you Ren, Mr. Renatus, that we take pride in the quality of our product! Now, I wanted to put you into some of our suits, formal wear- you look like you were raised right, am I right, son? Yer a refined type, likes to dress good.”

“Well... yes, admittedly.” I said.

“Well! That’s good, fine! But you with an exceptional build... I need someone fit, strong, to do something a li’l different- at least for now. For you, m’boy, I want you to be the face- metaphorically speaking- of our new line of, ah, undergarments for the discerning big and tall man.” The horse reached in to the package, pulling out a blue pair of boxers that had, emblazoned in bold, white letters, “THUNDER THIGHS” across the back.

My eyes went wide. I was... no. No, no, no. This was not okay. “Mr. Taylor... could you excuse me and my Agent... just for a moment?”

“Of course, son, of course!” The horse grinned.

I grabbed Theo’s shoulder, dragging the Cheshire out of the studio to a thankfully isolated room.

“Mr. De Fleureaux, please remain calm...”

“Thunder Thighs, Theo!”

“Yes, Mr. De Fleureaux, I saw, just-”

“No! Thunder. Thighs. You want me to go parading my ass around in boxers that read *THUNDER FUCKING THIGHS*.” I gripped Theo’s sides, boulder shoulders bouncing as my arms tensed, picking the Cheshire up.

“Mr. De Fleureaux, please!” Theo held out his arms, “Just relax. Put me down, if you would.”

I set down the cat, and crossed my arms, not happy.

“Mr. De Fleureaux, it’s perfect- they’ll be focusing on your... posterior, so your face won’t even show up. This is the best alternative, don’t you see? Besides, it’s too late to go to anyone else.”

“What?! Why?”

“You declined- don’t you remember? All those other e-mails were deleted.”

“THAT WASN’T ME!”

“Semantics.” Theo grinned, shrugging. “If you want to pay off your extra loans, I’m afraid you have to go through with it- and Mr. Taylor seems like *such* a friendly fellow.”

I was speechless. I had no one to blame but myself when I made this fucking cat my agent. “Fine.” I muttered, shoving Theo out of the way as I made my way back into the studio.

“I’m ready to sing, Mr. Taylor. We can begin the modeling whenever you want.”

The horse chuckled, clapping me on the back, “Fantastic, wonderful! I knew you were the right man for the job, my boy. I told myself!” The horse led me aside to a dressing room, as a pile of papers were presented to Theo- the cat’s grin was practically pushing past his cheeks as he signed my contract.

I stood in the dressing room, staring at the boxers. Christ, this was embarrassing. I removed my clothes, taking a glance in a mirror. The entire thing taken up by one thick pectoral. I could never catch a break, could I? Was I ever going to see my full reflection again, or did I have to go to Versailles’ Hall of Mirrors for that? I slipped the boxers on, finding them a bit snug. I had my mother’s hips, and I guess not even magical Cheshire trickery can change everything. The elastic hugged my thick hips, and, God. I looked ridiculous. Well, ridiculous isn’t the right word... the admirers I had collected over the past few weeks would have gone absolutely crazy to see me in these. They hugged the curves of my hips and posterior, in a rather complimentary fashion, framing my ass as quite perky.

God, did I really just describe myself that way?

I was... hesitant as I moved out of the dressing room. Mr. Taylor was quick to encourage me.

“A-ha! Those look grand on you, m’boy, just grand! Let’s not waste any time, shall we?” He said, motioning towards the green screens.

After saying a silent prayer that I was heavy enough for the floor to buckle and swallow me up, I moved to the designated area. Oh, God, there were dozens of cameras, all pointed at me, nearly as naked as the day I was born.

“Well, c’mon son, show us some back!”

“I, uh... there’s a lot of it, Mr. Taylor. I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

“He means, my good man,” Theo called, “Show off! Don’t stand there like you got called to the front of the class!”

I could just see Theo’s smug head mounted on my wall. One day.

But, they were paying me for this- at least I certainly hoped so, or Theo was going to be bent into shapes even his deluded Cheshire mind couldn’t imagine. I sighed, and flexed my arms, leaning forward as I could feel the fabric of those gaudy boxers stretch. I could feel my lats flare out spectacularly, a veritable topography of muscle spreading out in a wide plateau. Then I heard the cameras flashing. My tail whipped feverishly back and forth as I looked over my shoulder. Oh, God. This was too much. I could see Theo, grinning wide as ever.

“\$50,000, Mr. De Fleureaux.” His unmistakable voice sounded in my head.

...wait, what?

“\$50,000. They’re paying you \$50,000 for this, Mr. De Fleureaux. It was originally \$25,000, but I got Mr. Taylor to see things my way.” God, I could even see Theo’s grin in my mind.

...but \$50,000 was... more money than I had ever had to call my own in all my life. Well, if that’s what they were paying me, I suppose some short of show would be... acceptable. I tried my best to

